THE GOLDEN CHAIN

GWENDOLEN OVERTON

LITTLE NOVELS BY
FAVOURITE AUTHORS

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The Golden Chain

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THE TWO KNELT THERE, SIDE BY SIDE.

The Golden Chain

BY

GWENDOLEN OVERTON

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CHAPTER I

P to then no golden chain had entered into his experience — neither that which hung about the neck of Our Lady of the Carmen at Tierra Blanca, nor that of love which the optimistic old song assures us Time cannot break.

He lounged in his saddle with his arms crossed on the high pommel and indulged himself in idly fancying how an arrow shot from the hill crest where he was would go straight across the clear, pale evening heavens and stick, quivering its feather, in the bright and tiny star which touched one horn of the new moon on the outer edge. He was

on the top of a sheer, steep hill, steepest of the spur it ended, and his view was over all the world, which, in his one and twenty years, he had seen — over the mesa to the great blue ranges of the north and east, over the Valle del Muerto, grey and shrub-flecked and barren, to the higher ranges of the south and west. It had been a hard climb, and the cow-pony stood with its fore legs wide apart, its nostrils spreading and sinking, its cream-coloured mane and tail floating in the wind, and its sleek sides going in and out regularly, as it panted for breath. Keble dismounted to give it a better chance. Its nose went down to the sparse grass among the spears of scarlet sage and pink wind-flowers.

Just below the new crescent was a great snow mountain, gleaming warm tinted with the faint pink flush of the afterglow, its base vague in the mists that rise at nightfall in the distances of the plains. When the crescent and its

star gem began to grow yellower as the sky turned deeper purple, and the snow mountain a cold, hazy violet, his eyes dropped from them to the cañon down below. The road was hidden there by the thick pines, but before it entered the gorge it was plain for a long distance, winding around the base of a gentle swell, out into the valley beyond.

And there were two wagons just emerging along it, from under the shelter of the knoll, two covered wagons of which the canvas looked new and white.

He knitted his brow and shaded his far-visioned blue eyes with his hand.

There were two horses to the first wagon, the second was drawn by a spike team, the leader of which seemed to be a mule. A speck, which was doubtless a dog, followed. Until the deepening twilight began to make itself felt he watched, imagining who might be beneath the canvas, as he frequently allowed himself to imagine things—but

kept the diversion strictly to himself. Imagination, along the majority of lines. was discountenanced among his associates.

Presently he began the descent of the steep trail. It was almost dark — the clear darkness of southwestern nights, like the depths of a cold, still water pool. And among the pines, when he reached them, the road showed only as a streak of vaguely luminous grey. The pony broke into a long gallop, its unshod hoofs making hardly more than a patter on the pounded gravel. They came to a creek crossing, where the water trickled shallow over the stones, splashed through and went up the slight slope at the farther side.

Then a dog barked, the sharp, shrill yap of a cur, and a light shone from back among the trunks and branches of the trees.

The pony turned of its own accord into a branch road, cutting off from the main one to the right, trotted into a

wide clearing, and came to the abrupt halt learned of its lassoing experiences.

Its rider, whose six feet of stalwart body was ludicrously too big for the diminutive dimensions of his horse, flung himself off and, running his arm through the reins, walked up to two wagons whose fresh-painted bodies and red spokes gave back the shine of the lantern which hung against the log-cabin wall. Two lank beasts, half-dog, half-prairie wolf, sniffed about his heels. A strange dog cowered under a bucket dangling from a rear axle of one of the wagons, his bushy tail curved in under his legs. He looked anxious and deprecating and badly scared. The four horses and one mule were unhitched and tethered to the grain boxes at the backs of their respective turnouts, munching contentedly, snorting, and clanking the rings of their halters against the wood. It looked a prosperous outfit certainly.

There was nothing in the least unusual in the occurrence of strangers stopping

at the cabin over night. It was the halfway place, between the fort and Gold City, at one end — Tierra Blanca and its adjacent mines at the other. He was curious, but not too keenly so as not to stable his pony properly in the corral and give a parting rub to the warm white nose. Then, slapping the lash of his horse hair quirt against his boot-tops, he crossed to the cabin and opened the door.

From the threshold he took his observations with deliberation. There were four strangers in the room, two men and two women, and they sat with his father and younger brother at the far end, around a big open fireplace built of stones and after the Mexican fashion, across a corner. Mrs. Keble was visible in the kitchen working over the stove.

He closed the door behind him and came in.

The elder Keble had, in his youth, come from out the New England states, where he had been the teacher of the

school in his own town. And, on occasions, the traditions of that better land and long past time returned to him. He would revert then to ways and to modes of speech which were not those of the country wherein he had chosen to become a settler, a mere squatter, among the hills on the confines of an Indian reservation. He presented his elder son, Dudley, now, with elaboration and formality. The men rose and shook hands. So, likewise, did one of the women. Her black eyes had taken swift and practised appraisal, and her greeting was more than necessarily amiable. Dudley was not without experience of life of a kind, the life of cow camps and of the towns that follow afterward. And his own estimate was, in swiftness, no less than hers, in exactness somewhat greater. She, and such as she, he accepted as of a charm by no means equalled in virtue, but having for himself no immediate concern, arousing no particular interest.

The sweetness of her lingering look he met prosaically. Then he turned his attention to the other woman — hardly, he saw at once, so much a woman as a child. She had not risen, but she glanced up gravely into his face, and then — perhaps because it was a frank and pleasant face under its bronzing tan — she smiled, a half-wistful little smile, curling one corner of her mouth. He could see that she was tired out.

There were very few chairs in the cabin's scant furniture, and those few were in use. He went out again and brought in a potato box for himself, setting it on one end at the side of the hearth. The girl was across from him, but she had become, apparently, oblivious of his existence, and sat with her chin on her fist, absorbed in one blue-centred tongue of flame, which licked intermittently through the knot hole of a log. Her face was without colour, and her rough curls of brown were lustreless under the powder of

alkali dust. Now and then she yawned with all a child's weariness and unconsciousness, or closed the lids over her big violet eyes. The lashes were long as they lay against her cheeks. But he had made no study of the points and details of feminine beauty, and he did not take note of this one. In a general way he was of the opinion that she was prettier than the other of the swift black glances and the locks of vivid brass — beyond that his interest did not go. He had not caught her name, but the men were Lewis and Denison, and the woman was Denison also. As to what the quartet was doing here, from whence it came, and whither it was going, nothing was said — or else it had all been said before he had put in his appearance.

Mrs. Keble was passing in and out, bringing dishes and setting them on the red-covered table with a rap. He left his potato crate and went to her with an offer of help. It was not over-graciously

received. He followed her into the kitchen, where they were enveloped and choked in drifting smoke from the burning bacon grease still in the iron pan upon the hottest part of the stove. He took up the griddle and carried it out of doors. Mrs. Keble resented the correction implied, and sneered at his airs of superior nicety. At the best of times she was not a pleasant or lovable person. And to-night was by no means the best of times. She had worked since daylight in the cabin and the clearing, being one of those whose toil is unending and hard, but unproductive, too, of much visible result. She was worn out, as she invariably managed to be by nightfall. Moreover, she was of opinion that the other two women should have helped. They were furnishing their own provisions, to be sure, and had, further, given it to be understood that they would pay liberally. That, as Mrs. Keble saw it, did not end their obligation. To pay without lending a hand was insti-

tuting class privilege. She was no subdued New England woman to encourage that. Hers was the rampant democracy of the West which had given her birth.

Her son ignored the ill humour, which was not so unusual as to be disconcerting. He took from her a tin plate full of big, yellow baking-powder biscuits. Then he jerked his head over his shoulder to where the group around the fire could be dimly seen through the streaks of smoke.

"Who," he asked, "are those?"

"Actors," she answered shortly, her lips setting on the word. "Travelling actors."

She banged the oven door to. He frowned. He had seen other troupes of itinerant players in the towns, after round-ups, and his memories of them and their mode of life were not such as he was glad to have to associate with the girl who sat in there with her cleft chin on her knuckles, and her big, tired eyes watching the flaming knot hole.

He carried the heaped biscuits in to the table, and his mother followed with the coffee-pot. They sat down to the supper.

Mrs. Denison, having accepted her discomfiture so far as the son was concerned, after the custom of the free lance took the next at hand with cheerfulness, and devoted herself, her bright glances, and insistent smile to the father. There was a twinkle of amusement behind his eyes; but he developed a turn for elaborate compliment, and a store of quotations in ornate prose and verse of which he had never before, to the knowledge of either his wife or son, given evidence. Mrs. Keble was rigidly silent. The men ate hungrily, intent upon just that, and the girl sat through the meal only answering when some one chanced to speak to her.

When the supper was over the strangers went back to the fireplace, still with never an offer of help to their severe hostess. The blonde was hang-

ing on Keble's words. Mrs. Keble demanded assistance of the boys, pointedly and in a raised voice, which, however, missed its aim. Dudley sent her to sit with the others, taking charge of the work himself, clearing the table, washing the dishes, and scraping pots and pans.

It took him over an hour. When he had finished, his father and mother and younger brother had gone to bed, the others out to the wagons in which they slept. The big room was deserted, and, except for the glow of the coals in the fireplace, dark. But the red light touched the hearthstones and the tines of a great pair of antlers over the door, and played along the backs of a row of books upon a shelf. The chromos and pictures cut from papers and tacked up against the wall rustled a little in the wind that came through the chinks and crevices of the pine half-logs.

CHAPTER II

IT was icy cold when Dudley went out, with a panful of corn, to feed the hens — icy cold and still barely light. The dawn was stealing through the pines. Out in the valley it was probably broad morning, but the days were shorter by several hours here in the cañon. The dogs came rubbing themselves against his legs, and even the stranger one leapt up and down around him. An Indian, treading noiselessly through the woods at the edge of the clearing, passed between the trunks and out of sight. The hairs on the necks of the animals bristled. They had seen Indians every day of their lives, but had never become accustomed to them.

Dudley went to the chicken coop and opened the trap, then stood off and called, his deep voice melodious, "Hea-a-a-re, chick-a-chick-a-chick, he-a-a-re, chick, chick, chick."

They came out, the first one stopping in the small opening and peering with the indecision and want of purpose common to its kind; then another pushed her through, and they crowded by twos and threes, tumbling over each other in their greediness, scampering around the wide-tossed corn, golden, white, and red. The stock belonging to the theatrical outfit snorted suggestively. He went up to them and fed each a few grains from the palm of his hand, surreptitiously, lest his mother should come out, and, seeing, object.

No one was stirring in the wagons yet, but he had been told to call them. His mother was getting breakfast. He scratched on the canvas of the first wagon, at which the strange dog sniffed suspiciously about his heels, showing

its teeth. Two women's voices answered him drowsily. That of the girl he recognised as lower pitched and softer than the other's. He went away whistling.

While he was in the corral, milking the half-savage long-horn, whose milk was as thin as herself, the girl came over from the wagons and rested her arms on the top of the fence. He nodded to her. The corner of her mouth curled up into the half-appealing smile, and she answered his "good morning." And then, after a pause of watching him, she put a request — if she were to get herself a cup, might she have some fresh milk? Fresh milk as a fit drink for anything more discriminating than calves, had never before occurred to him. There was, he ventured the suggestion, cold milk from the evening before in the house. If she would wait until he should have finished, he would get her that. And he meant to get it — his mother's certain opposition to the contrary notwithstanding. But it was warm and

frothing that she liked it, and she went away for the cup. He filled it, hissing and spurting the milk in, until the foam stood high. She took it from him and drank — a fleck of white on the tip of her up-tilted nose. Then she stood beside him, swinging the empty cup. And he explained that one cow had gone dry, and another had eaten loco-weed and died, that the present pair were not much good, and that he was keeping a lookout in the foot-hills for any wandering ones that might look promising.

When he had finished with the first one, he picked up his box and pail and went over to the other. The girl followed. She moved to its head and put out her fingers to scratch the white star on its forehead. It was a heifer caught, mean and wild, in the hills. For a second it watched her with rolling, angry eyes. Then it flung its horns at her in a vicious sweep. She sprang back and the horns missed, but Dudley had jumped to his feet and half the small supply of new

milk had spilled on the ground before he could right the pail. He foresaw his mother's indignation and taunts. It would be some time before she would let him hear the end of it. The girl retreated to the fence and he went back to the milking with closer attention, bending his fair head down close in to the bony red flanks. And because a pair of violet eyes were watching him, and a soft voice spoke admiringly of his skill, the task became suddenly interesting, and he was urged to do his best by the self-same impulse which has sent men to labour willingly since their first father tilled the ground at the east of the Garden.

And when he had taken the milk into the house and given his account of the shortage boldly, he turned his back on his mother and her remarks, and went out again to sit on the top of the corral fence, his heels hooked on to a lower bar, talking with the little actress who balanced on the tongue of one of the green-bodied wagons.

In the half hour before they were called to breakfast he had learned many things,—her age, primarily, which was seventeen, and her name, which was Evans—Felicia Evans. Her aunt had given her the name in her motherless babyhood. And her aunt was she of the brazen hair. He liked the name. A worn and torn volume of Shakespeare, in microscopic print was among the two dozen books which filled the shelf in the cabin, and which had been almost all brought by his father, a quarter of a century before, from the distant East. He had read it time and again and he liked the names which ended in "a" Viola, Cordelia, Ophelia, Miranda, Perdita. Felicia—it was a good deal like those.

The morning breeze, much warmer now, blew the unruly brown curls about her face. She kept throwing them back with a toss of the head, smoothing them down with her hand. It dawned upon him with all the force of an original

discovery that the hand was small and white, and he kept looking at it while she told him how, for the first time, she had played Juliet at the post before she had come on here. Theretofore she had always, it seemed, been nurse to her aunt's Juliet. There came into his eyes something of the twinkle which had been in his father's the night before, as the erstwhile scholar had encouraged the blandishments of that same aunt. But Felicia was oblivious to it, or to anything in the situation which might be provocative of amusement. She was a serious little person, whose forehead wrinkled with earnestness at moments, in a manner which reminded Dudley irresistibly of his dog.

The commandant at the post, she went on to tell him, had given them the use of the schoolroom, and there had been a platform at one end. For three nights they had played to packed houses. The post band had furnished an orchestra and some of the soldiers had

been the citizens, kinsfolk, and maskers. They had had no costumes but their uniforms, to be sure, and it had been necessary to do without the ladies Montague and Capulet — and certain others; but there had been a balcony of packing boxes covered with turkey-red, and an orchard of real bushes which the men had chopped. Her own success had surpassed anything the company had ever before experienced. The second night some of the officers had thrown her bouquets of wild flowers. Her pale little face flushed, and her eyes were shining as she recounted it.

Then his father came out upon the back steps and called them in to breakfast. They started for the cabin together.

"If you like," she volunteered, still full of her subject, "if you like, I will show you after breakfast how I did the balcony scene." She was looking up to him from under the long lashes. He acquiesced.

And after breakfast they went out again. She led the way back to the corral. There must be a balcony, she told him, and she had seen an empty stall with a manger. She found a foothold and climbed upon it, getting her balance.

"Now," she admonished, "begin."

They had brought out the ancient volume of plays, and he was to read the lines of Romeo. He had his thumb at the place and opened to it now, standing down below her, his boots ankle deep in the bedding. He grew burning red under his bronze, to the roots of his hair. But he began.

"*He jests at scars who never felt a wound.*"

He stopped. She had had her back to him — in default of a curtain. She turned now, slowly and languidly, leaning one arm upon the partition which divided the stall from that in which the sorrel cow-pony munched and swished its tail unconcernedly. Her eyes were

gazing dreamily down, and Dudley looking into them grew more scarlet and embarrassed, and forgot to go on. She recalled him. He returned to the book with alacrity.

"*But soft what light through yonder window breaks it is the east and Juliet is the sun.*"

He hurried on without punctuation, taking his breath through his nose when he had to, and bringing up winded and by no means impassioned, at the final sigh.

"*O that I were a glove upon that hand that I might touch that cheek.*"

There trembled down to him, just audible, and like the night wind from out the Valle del Muerto, through the pines, a soft "*Ay me!*"

Another full inch of close pressed printing. It was out of proportion, he felt. But he attacked it and came out resolutely — sailing upon "the bosom of the air" with much the lightness with which he stood firmly planted

in the litter of the stall. And then the words which, for him, had never been worn to the threads of ridicule and bathos.

"*O Romeo, Romeo*," the tears were on her lashes, "*wherefore art thou Romeo?*"

There was no need of painted canvas trees for her, nor of unsteady balcony to rock with the movements of her arms, nor of curtains behind which to disappear. Orchard, balustrade of stone, draperies — all were there in that mind which is ever "its own place." And even for him there hardly lacked the trimmed shrubs and tall trees, gravelled walk and high wall of the cut on the front page of the book. It was not the roof of the stall above them, but a night sky.

"*— and I no longer be a Capulet*," she finished.

She waited, and realising that she did, he broke the interval of sound with his own voice, and learned thereby how one

may stun one's loveliest thoughts and cause to vanish those aspirations which have no name, with the dull blow of one's heavy words.

"*Take all myself*," she breathed in answer to him.

The spell of the voice, of the thin, little outstretched arms, of the entreating eyes, was full upon him, the real and commonplace world had melted away. It was brought back. A giggle, a choked and subdued giggle, came from behind them. The beautiful fancy shivered into a million bits, and he whirled around furious and ashamed and mortified. His brother perched on a post of the corral and grinned cheerfully.

"They're waiting for you, miss," he suggested; "they've been looking for you everywhere this last ten minutes."

She was down at once without any ladder of ropes. And if the two boys were conscious of absurdity in the situation, she clearly was not. She climbed

up beside her uncle on the seat of the wagon which was drawn by the spike team. The other, with her aunt and Lewis, had already pulled out.

She leaned over and held out her hand to young Keble. "Good-by," she said. She was smiling with no more than her usual hint of pensiveness. But, as for him, he was not happy as she drew her fingers from his big, hard grasp. The wagon started and rattled away, the dog trotting after it. He stood where she had left him and saw the last flutter of the brown linen skirt at the turn in the road beyond the clearing. Then the pine trunks hid her from sight.

CHAPTER III

T should be across the fair meadows of Life that Youth follows its first Love — to the song of birds and over myriad flowers. But it was across the Valley of Death that Dudley Keble followed his — by the double track of wagon wheels sunk in the scorching sands. The sun was a disk of fire in the sky, the air simmered in heat waves and seemed to sing. Away, far beyond the miles upon miles of sparse, cloying-sweet greasewood and glaring dust, rose the barrier mountains like great, deep, unpolished sapphires, set in the desert's raw gold. Yucca stalks and cacti and palo verde stood above the lower bushes here and there. From time to time dead

steers were beside the road, and the hide had dried on their skeletons. The black sockets of their eyes stared with a hollow questioning—which had no answer. Lizards whisked from behind small stones or under sage clumps, and horned toads gave bright looks around as they scuttled along, leaving the trail of their peaked tails thread-like in the sand. A coyote trotted away from the road, and then, when he was far enough off, waited, coming back afterward to investigate the hoof tracks — a wretched, thin, grey little beast getting his mean existence from death, he and the black crow the spirits of the desert places.

Prairie dogs scurried in and out of their holes, ground owls perched on their knolls, or a hawk sat on a branch, still as stone except for its bright, blinking eyes. And the heat quivered always pitilessly, until the dog, following at the sorrel pony's heels, whined with the sting of its seared eyes and burned feet, and with the pain of thirst. It had

been born to the cañon and the shade of pines.

Dudley rode on, lopsided in his saddle, his reins hanging loose, his sombrero pulled far down, his pony's head drooped, and its neck swinging limply from side to side, the sweat caked in salt on its flanks and withers and belly, and behind its ears. They passed an Indian and his squaw and papoose, following a trail to the agency. The Indian nodded and grunted. Then it was a Mexican riding alone. He smiled, pleased, and spoke a "buenos dias." They both reined up. Where was he going? the Gringo asked. The man nodded forward, "Adelante," he said. And where did he come from? His head motioned backward, "Detras" — "going ahead," coming "from behind"; it was *his* race which had learned the philosophy of existence.

He rode on with an "adios." Dudley turned in the saddle and called after him. How much farther was it to Tierra Blanca?

The Mexican pulled up his pony with a cruel jerk of the spade bit. "Como cuatro horas, señor," he answered.

"Muchisimas gracias," said Dudley, and kept on his way. Four hours more — if the Greaser knew, which it was more than probable he did not. He came from behind, he was going ahead — and time was a thing without meaning.

Dudley touched the pony with the fringed end of the lariat that hung from his cantle, and it went a little faster. The double tracks were always there on the road before him, cutting it until it merged in the distance of scrub and grey sage.

It was three o'clock, he judged by the sun, when he stopped at the one ranch house by the way, — a mud hut on an alkali patch of earth, — where was a windmill and a leaky water-trough. The pony sucked at the water noisily and long. A dozen hens droned and crooned to the heat. Three savage dogs came walking and snarling around his own,

but the latter was too nearly perishing to heed them. Having lapped up all it could drink, it dropped down in a puddle, and panted. A Mexican woman, wrapped to the eyes in a black shawl, crouched in the narrow shadow of the house. There was a litter of cigarette ends and burned matches around her on the ground. Five children were beside her, and a man came to the doorway and stood waiting. To the Gringo's "cuanto cuesta?" he answered that it should be what he pleased.

"Lo que quiere;" and he accepted a two-bit piece for the priceless water of a parched land, which he was allowing to go to waste out of the trough because he was too lazy to remedy the matter.

Would the señor go in and rest? And the Mexican pointed to the black interior from which issued the inevitable odour of chili and cigarettes.

Dudley refused. Had there been two wagons by here? He described them and their occupants.

"Si, señor," there had. "Hace como una hora."

Only an hour ahead! He wheeled about with a brief "good-by" and continued on his road. The dog looked piteously after him, then rose slowly to its sore feet and went too. After a while he took mercy upon it, and reaching down, swung it up and across his saddle bow. And still the Valle del Muerto stretched on and on; but finally there rose a few low, stony swells, and the sand grew less deep. Jack-rabbits darted out of the bushes and bounded away, their long ears acock. The tracks of the wagons almost disappeared except in the soft bottoms of now dry arroyos, where the sand was black streaked, perhaps with washed gold. Ahead he could see two moving specks of white, and presently cottonwoods — fresh, pale green trees of the barrens, growing wherever the least little muddy acequia will give their roots moisture, rustling their silver-faced leaves coolly

in the merest breath of a breeze. Where the cottonwoods were, there was the town, and before long he could distinguish the white houses. After forty miles of desert, Tierra Blanca was just ahead.

He rode into the main street and along it, until he came to where a half-dozen scrawny, overtrapped horses, tied to a hitching-rail in front of an abode, announced unmistakably a saloon. He went up to a Mexican who stood in the doorway leaning against the lintel, soft eyed, his silver-twisted sombrero pulled well down, a zarape, gay and multi-coloured, flung over his shoulders with a grace no courtier could have surpassed. He was from across the border. Had he seen two green-bodied wagons pass?

He took a puff of his brown cigarette. Yes, he had seen them.

Which way had they gone?

"Por alla," he signed with his head, as requiring less exertion than the outstretching of a hand.

"The next street?"

"Si, señor." Dudley rode on.

He found them in a few minutes. The wagons had stopped at an empty space in the shade of a circle of cottonwoods — what answered to the plaza of the town. The horses were unhitched and hobbled out, and the men were busy with the contents of the outfit. But Felicia sat on a gnarled root by the edge of the tinkling acequia, her hands clasped around her knees, looking down the street toward the church. Until he stopped in front of her, she did not see him. Then she jumped to her feet in surprise, her face questioning and — lighting. How had he come?

As she herself, he told her — by the Valle del Muerto.

And why? The answer was in his direct and steady blue eyes. Her own shifted and fell. She fingered the leathern rosette and tassel on the headstall of his bridle. But he had not looked away, and she knew it. She met the eyes

again, unwillingly, compelled to it, and smiling rather nervously.

He sat very upright for a moment. Then he drew up his slack reins. A corral and fodder had to be found for his horse. He would be back directly — would she wait? Her answer was not in words, but in one of her comprehensive gestures which said sometimes more. She threw out her hands with a sweep — here was the town, and beyond was the desert; she could not but remain somewhere near by.

A small, full toned bell began to ring on top of the church, and soon there came from every direction women wrapped in black shawls, some few in the graceful draperies of dull blue and brown rebozos — men ragged and lithe, occasionally with zarapes or blankets over their shoulders, and children, all going in the same direction. A fat and untidy priest came out from his house and entered the building. The men lifted their hats, the children and some of the women made

the movement of kissing his hand as he passed.

Dudley returned on foot. Was he a Catholic? Felicia asked him. He repulsed the idea. He was the son of a New England father, the descendant of Puritans, of a family which, though large, and old as New England itself, had never, throughout its remotest offshoot, even bowed the knee to the Scarlet Woman. And the inherited prejudice was added to by that acquired in a country where, generally speaking, only the alien and ignorant Mexican element was under the guidance of priests.

But the girl, child and companion of those to whom the name of God was, at most, one with which to curse, and whose souls concerned them not at all, was emotional and imaginative, and at that age, which is readiest for religious enthusiasms if presented in picturesque form. A priest in the last town at which the troupe had stopped had made the most of two days and had sown seeds

that needed only a little cultivation to spring up into conversion.

She was thinking of becoming a Catholic herself, she told Dudley now, with a little unconscious air of sanctity. His opinion of the faith underwent a slight modification forthwith. It was some dia de fiesta. She was going to vespers. Would he go with her? He hesitated yet. Perhaps not the mark of the Beast, but surely that of the Fool was upon a man who should bow before that altar. For women, possibly— But she was over the acequia and looking back, waiting. He crossed the ditch, too, and the Rubicon of his prejudices, and followed her through the big door into the cool, shadowy interior.

She went forward, up the aisle, between the line of rough, wooden benches, and knelt on the earth floor, crossing herself. He knelt, too, but on one knee only, by way of a compromise.

The church was adobe, whitewashed, not only outside, but within as well. In the rafters and the choir balcony, too insecure and worm-eaten now to hold any weight, hundreds of swallows nested, flying in and out and twittering shrilly. The main altar was gay with coloured mosquito netting — arsenic green and magenta pink, with paper and wax flowers in vases. Over it all were looped in long festoons, strings of alternate powder puffs and red chilis. At one of the two side altars was the town's patron saint. It was he who brought rain, dearest of benefactions, to this land of parched and blinding white soil, and of many a drought. Dudley, from where he knelt, could see him, a figure of wood some three feet high, attired in a cocked hat, a swallow-tail coat of blue with brass buttons, and a frilled shirt and stock. He had knee-breeches and pumps, and he drove a span of wooden oxen by cotton-ribbon reins. Pendent to his wrist, at his side,

was another figure, smaller still, a tiny image of Napoleon Bonaparte, cocked hat, hand in waistcoat, all complete. There were many offerings at this shrine.

The other altar was the Virgin's. Only the grotesqueness, the absurdity, of it reached the boy's matter-of-fact, practical mind. That faith might lend a certain dignity to even strings of powder puffs and red chilis, and to carved and painted mannikins, it was not given him to realise. He had, at the best, only a good deal of contempt for these men, women, and children of a gentle, mysterious race, kneeling there in the twilight, mingling the murmurs of their soft voices with the sleepy twittering of the swallows in the vegas overhead.

On one of those women his eyes stopped and rested. He recognised her. It was Josefina Arcos. Two years before he had known her. He had come to Tierra Blanca with some cow-boys, whom he had been helping

at a round-up. They had urged him, and it was to have been his first debauch. As such, however, it had ended almost before it had fairly begun. What the older men had pictured to him as the end, worth any price he might be so fortunate as to be able to pay, worth all the toil it might take to amass that price, he had found Dead Sea fruit at nearly the first taste. It was not, as he had informed those who had undertaken his sophistication, all that it was cracked up to be; and if it were their idea of a good time, they were welcome to it, but for himself it seemed to lack attraction. He had expected to be scoffed at, or condemned as a prude, but neither had followed. It was a difference of taste, and they were prepared to admit it as such. Possibly he had gained rather than lost in their estimation.

For a week, however, he had stayed around Tierra Blanca, mainly through disinclination to go back to the cabin in

the clearing, and to the atmosphere of his mother's complaints and bickerings at his father's scholarly ineptitude. But Pepita Arcos had had much to do with it as well. She had been a very pretty little Mexican, some fifteen years old, who had not only accepted his attentions, but sought them. His friends of wider experience, having observed her during one baile, had suggested to him that she was neither more nor less than throwing herself at his head. It had already begun to be borne in upon him that such was the case. He liked her more than a little. Her great brown eyes were full of a tragic sadness for all that her little soul was happy and trivial. She had attracted him. The morals all about him were easy to say the least of it. He had had no reason to suppose that the girl was any better than she should have been; that if he were to love and leave her, it would be the first time she had been loved and left. He had met her advances halfway thereafter — and then

he had found the error in his conclusions; had found that she was really in love with him, and that she was not as yet, at any rate, to be judged by the company she kept, into which her own sordid, debased old mother urged her. Her first irrevocable step along the road to destruction was yet to be made. And young Keble had had no mind to be the one to start her. Some one else would do it, he supposed, sooner or later, but he himself would not. He had given her to understand as much, and also that he intended going away. Her anguish and despair had put him through a trying ordeal — one through which he had no wish ever to be obliged to pass again. In a moment of remorse and pity he had thought of marrying her. But he was too clear headed not to foresee the results. She was a Mexican — and he did not love her.

If he had not fancied the easy debauchery of the other cow-boys, he had liked this less. His week in Tierra

Blanca had not, he felt, been a success. He was so kind to the little Mexican that, not being accustomed to kindness, her heart broke. Yet he said good-by, resolute in his determination, and left the town. Since then he had been in other towns, but it was the first time he had returned to Tierra Blanca.

He wondered now, as he knelt there on one knee, his hat in his hand, and studied the face showing from under the black shawl, whether Josefina had become after all, that which her abominable old mother had tried to make of her. It was probable, he decided.

When the short service was over and the priest and his small acolyte had left the chancel, the figures, grown shadowy in the gathering twilight, rose from the floor and the benches and went shuffling out. But Felicia crossed over to the altar of Mary. Josefina had preceded her and the two knelt there, side by side. Felicia had put a shawl over her own head, but a grey one, not black like

those of all the Mexican women. He could see her face from under it, white in the gloom, and upturned. The little Mexican's head was dropped.

As he stood in the aisle and waited he looked at the statue of the Virgin. It was much like many another that he had seen, but around its neck hung a golden chain, thick as a small rope, and with pendent ornaments of gold, or of brass, as he supposed it, since the combined wealth of the devout of Tierra Blanca would hardly have sufficed for the purchasing of the finer metal.

The chain was of gold, nevertheless, and it was the votive offering of a señora whose husband had found riches in the ground not far from the town. For more than a year it had hung about the Virgin's neck day and night, and not even one of the many desperadoes who came and went at Tierra Blanca had attempted to make away with it. As for the faithful, it was held by them in great and peculiar veneration.

The swallows in the rafters and choir were chirruping sleepily, and the church was almost dark. Josefina arose from her knees. She came toward him, glanced up, and stopped, her tapolo falling back from her head, showing the thick hair parted low over her forehead, and hanging in two braids. Her hand went to her heart.

"Buenas tardes, Pepita," he whispered. She looked quickly back to the girl still kneeling in front of the side altar, then up into his face again. Her lips tried to form an answering "buenas tardes," but it was quite inaudible. She drew the rebozo up and close together, and glided out — a shadow through the shadows.

After a moment Felicia stood up and came to him, and they went together out of the church, into the red light of the sunset.

CHAPTER IV

HE main street of Tierra Blanca was much more crowded than usual, for its whole length of perhaps a thousand yards. It was a dark night, but lanterns were hung against the lintels of some of the houses, and a half-dozen torches flared smokily in front of the music hall in which the performance was to take place. The lurid light glistened redly on the leaves of the rows of cottonwoods and on the ripples of the acequia beside which the trees grew. There might have been five or six hundred in all, walking to and fro in the aimlessness of waiting. Some were Mexicans — the majority — and some were whites, inhabitants of the town and the neighbouring ranches,

prospectors, miners, and cow-boys. Dark men with bright tinsel on their big hats, with gay blankets swathing them to their chins, the points of yellow light of their cigarettes no more fiery than the two points that peered from under their sombrero brims — women, dark too, with bows or paper flowers in their black hair, sometimes with many-hued shawls covering their breasts and white gowns, laughing — with teeth and eyes that flashed in the weird light. There were other women, less dark of skin, but often more so of soul, flaunting and playing their parts. And there were men, too, of the fairer race, taller, more massive, as a rule, almost as picturesque, with their boots and showy ties, and even, in instances, gaudy shirts. They moved to and fro, in and out, with something the regularity of a peasant chorus in an opera. Four Mexicans marched up and down the middle of the street, picking and sweeping at wire-stringed guitars and a banjo, singing love songs.

They tinkled the first strain of "La Golondrina," and many voices took it up and swelled it, sweet and yearning, to the deep sky.

> "Adonde irá veloz y fatigada,
> La Golondrina que de aqui se va
> O, si en el aire gemirá extraviada
> Buscando abrigo, y no lo encontrará
> Junto á mi lecho, le pondré su nido
> En donde puede la estacion pasar.
> Tambien yo estoy en la region perdido,
> O, cielo santo, y sin poder volar."

Felicia, standing with Keble in the shadow of a wall, away from the jostling crowd, had joined in with the plaintive words. There was a pause, then they began again.

> "Dejé tambien mi patria idolotrada
> Esa mansion que me miró nacer.
> Mi vida es hoy errante y angustiada
> E ya no puedo á mi casa volver
> Ah ! ven querida, amada peregrina
> Mi corazon al tuyo estrecharé
> Oiré tu canto tierna golondrina
> Recordaré mi patria y lloraré."

He listened to the immature young voice, with its rich, low notes full of the thrill of the song's longing for the abandoned home. Yet he knew that she had never had a home, that her life of wandering had begun when she had been born, fatherless, in a tent on the outskirts of a mining camp. She had been telling him of it, as they had stood in the darkness and watched the people passing and repassing beyond the row of trees. And she went on with it now, when the song was ended: how that her mother had died there in the tent, and she herself, at the age of two months, had made her first appearance upon a stage, beginning even then the life of the itinerant player.

He had no need to be told what it meant to follow that profession over the desert and through the mountains, in rough new towns, among miners and cow-boys and desperadoes, and with such a woman as the aunt for only counsellor. She must, he realised, have known

more than once already the hard necessity of self-protection and defence. But that she had met the necessity fairly and come out unscathed, he would have contended for against all challengers, as he had only that morning, contended for it against his ridiculing, indignant, and disgusted parents.

A hand-bell was rung vigorously in front of the music-hall. It was the signal that the play would soon be beginning, that the doors were opening to admit whosoever had a quarter of a dollar to pay, or fifty cents for the reserved benches at the front.

"I must go," she said, with a note of reluctance.

He put out his two hands and caught hers, drawing her to him. "Don't," he said unsteadily. The light from a torch which some one was carrying by fell on them, behind him, making a radiance through his thick, light hair, and full on her protesting, half-frightened face. He dropped the hands instantly.

She moved away and he stooped to take up his soft felt sombrero from where he had laid it on the ground.

When she was out, well beyond the shadow line, she stopped and looked back. "Be sure to sit well in front," she called to him, "and to wait for me there afterward."

He answered something indistinctly. She was not angry with him, then. But he was angry with himself, and he stood still, turning the sombrero around and around by the brim, frowning and kicking at a stone. He had never meant to use the course with her that one used with the others, that he had used with little Pepita Arcos two years before. He had evolved theories of life and conduct for himself, unaided by any precept or example, and one of them was that no man who was not either soft and a poor sort, or else coarse-natured, attempted with a good woman, to resort to kisses and the like until he should have asked her promise of

marriage. With the others — he took that easily — any course was justifiable there.

He jammed the hat down on his head, pulled it over his brows savagely, and in a frame of mind of much disgust with himself went into the crowd.

He was not oblivious to the glances of many of the women gathered around the door and reading the Spanish and English bill posters in red and blue which were placarded against the wall. He shrugged off good-humouredly fingers that touched his broad shoulders, or were laid on his arms as he pushed his way through the press until he stood directly in front of the door. He dropped his four-bit piece into Lewis's palm and made for the middle of the long bench directly in front of the stage. The room filled to overflowing directly, and not more than half of the expectant public could get in. Plays did not happen in Tierra Blanca every week. All the benches were crowded, and as there

were not enough seats, many had brought their own folding chairs, camp-stools, and even boxes, and had seated themselves where they chose. As for the rest, they crowded against the walls, their figures standing out in bold relief of black and bright colour against the harsh white. The only lights were two bracket lamps with newly polished reflectors, and four lanterns in front of the flowered-calico drawing curtain, which was hung across the platform.

Keble looked around for Josefina Arcos. She did not appear to be in the house. He had hardly expected to see her. The inquiries he had made concerning her, while he had eaten his supper at the restaurant that evening, had brought out the information that she had gone — not the way he would have supposed, and which her mother had arranged for her, but the way of religion and a quite superior sanctity. She was known already as Santa Pepita, and was accredited with the working of cer-

tain miracles, the curing of the diseased and even of the crippled, and the bringing of rain by her prayers. Among the Mexican population she was greatly revered and implicitly obeyed — the power of the padre himself being secondary to hers. The thing was not unprecedented. Nearer the border there dwelt a Mexican girl who had likewise attained wide fame and large influence as a saint among both her own kind and the Indians of a formidable tribe, and who had stirred them up to a fierce conflict against the Mexican government more than once. Santa Pepita's power was used, however, it seemed, for the promoting of peace, not of bloodshed.

"Sometime when the rain goes back on her, or a cure don't work, she'll lose the job," had communicated his unregenerate informant; "but so far she's run in luck, and what she says, goes with the Greasers every time."

Lewis, having abandoned the box office, came through the room and

climbed on to the platform, disappearing behind the curtain. It was the only stage entrance — except one counted as such two windows leading from the platform to the ground outside.

There was a mysterious sound of moving and whispering behind the curtain, which keyed expectation to the pitch. Dudley recalled his own infantile conception of a stage. Once as a very small youngster he had heard his father and another man talking together of a play upon a "stage." Having asked for information and been given it painstakingly by his father, he had arrived at the satisfactory if somewhat confused conclusion that certain people, called actors, told stories while they walked about or sat in a buckboard, such as carried the mail, and went by the cabin once a week on its way from Gold City to the Agency. That was the "stage"; and several times it had been held up by the white men or Indians, and had failed to pass at the appointed time.

There came now a hush behind the scenes. The bell rang and the red folds parted and were pulled slowly back. Some one turned low the two bracket lamps.

The play was in four acts, dealing with the thrilling adventures of two beautiful damsels — the one very good, the other very bad — who loved the same gallant cow-boy. In the last act the attempt of the jealous rival upon the life of the virtuous maiden, being foiled, the virtuous maiden was safely united to the cow-boy, and the other was obliged to content herself with the villain, her suitor and a faro dealer of blackest moral hue. It was not Felicia who played the part of the virtuous one, but her aunt, radiant in pink muslin. And Felicia, her unformed little figure looking more thin and slight than ever in trailing black, her face, too, seeming more colourless and more wistful, threw herself into the part of villainess with a laudable determination not rewarded by the effect.

Dudley's face grew severe with vexation and disapproval. He refrained from joining in the applause of the noble and admirable sentiments uttered by the blond maiden and always paused after, expectantly. He crushed his hat in his fists.

The curtain came together at the end, and there arose stamping and clapping and calling. The folds parted again and the four came out to bow. Somebody in the middle of the room stood up, and, using the two actresses to point his text, began a scathing of them, and of the other women in the room, in language of Pentateuchal force and plainness. Dudley, turning, recognised him for a man he had seen before, a Mormon of hulking, gigantic form and evil countenance, who had his many mansioned ranch a few miles out from the town. Another man silenced him with a hand over his mouth, and several together bundled him out. Then the audience dispersed, and the room was

empty of all save Keble, who sat waiting. The two actors came in front of the curtain and extinguished the lanterns, then stepped down among the vacant benches and went out. The aunt followed almost at once, and Felicia a few moments later. She had, in that corner of the platform which was partitioned off for the women's dressing-room, taken off the black gown, symbolical of her villany, and she was again in the old brown linen.

They went together out into the street. "Come and get some tamales," he suggested. He was hungry and supposed that she must be. They went to a one-room adobe on the plaza. A rich, greasy odour came out from it, with puffs of the onion-laden smoke of frying things which blurred the light of the one candle set in the neck of a bottle. In the hovel there was only a roll of bedding bundled up into a corner, two stools of hide and willow, and a rickety stove. In the centre of the floor

a circle of blackened stones held a fire of wood coals, on top of which rested a big clay griddle. Cakes of ground corn were frying there, and on the stove were enchiladas and tamales and chili-con-carne being kept warm. The air was thick with the pungent, strong smells. Some chickens roosted on a beam overhead. There were no windows and only one door. Through the smoke a huddled figure showed, sitting on the ground behind the fire. And a man was turning the corn gorditas.

Dudley did the buying while Felicia stood just within, leaning against the wall a little wearily. He came back with four tamales, and they went again into the outer night. The streets were still fairly full. Couples sat close together on the ground, in the blackness under the trees, others strolled back and forth. From the saloons and dance halls came the sounds of violins and guitars, of clattering glass and noisy carousing. The little village, had been

quaint and peaceful enough — even virtuous, in its way — so long as it had been left to its Mexican inhabitants. But now that it had acquired a mining population of whites, it was become a spot of general vice and toughness, on a gala night like this as unhidden and open as well could be. Dudley and the girl went their way in the midst of it, comprehending it fully, but not part of it. And, finding the step of the church deserted, they sat down upon it to eat their tamales.

"We are not going on to-morrow," she told him. "We will be able to fill another house." They finished the tamales, but still they sat where they were, silent, watching the moving figures off on the street. He would have put out his hand and taken hers as it lay on her lap but for his determination not to make love to her after any such fashion. When the time should come — and he planned it for the next night — he would ask her to marry him, and

if she were willing to, they would be married at once. There would be, so far as he could see, no reasons for delay, and many against it. That her aunt and the two men would oppose any such arrangement, he foresaw; but it was a difficulty he would do what he could to meet when it should present itself. In the meanwhile he was happy enough to have her there beside him.

The carousing and singing and quarrelling in the saloons grew louder, the passers much less frequent. She asked the time and he took out his watch — a big gold one which had been his father's in the New England country. It was two o'clock. "I must go," she said, rising.

He took her to the wagons. Neither the men nor her aunt were there. The latter, he suggested, might perhaps have gone to look for her. Felicia was not inclined to think so, and she explained that her whereabouts, at any hour of the day or night, did not

concern Mrs. Denison, provided always that she was on hand for the performances.

The abomination of it roused righteous anger and horror in the young fellow's breast. But he refrained from comment. She could not stay here alone, was all he ventured.

Why could she not? she asked, a little surprised. "I often do it," she said — "generally."

"Go to bed," he commanded, with authority. "I'll wait here until your aunt comes."

She laughed with the easy cynicism of long custom. "You may spend the rest of the night there, then," she warned.

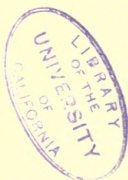
"Very well," he answered determinedly, "I'll spend the rest of the night here." And he helped her into one wagon and sat himself down upon the tongue of the other for the vigil. He was spared it, however. Mrs. Denison came back almost at once, and

her husband with her. But Keble walked away far from satisfied, and the more so that a sceptical query of his mother's regarding the trio of grown players occurred to him. He was newly conscious of the desirability of propriety, though up to then he had been as carelessly tolerant of all vice, save only horse-stealing and card-cheating, as was the rest of his sparsely populated, heterogeneous world.

He sat for a while on a bench outside a saloon, listening to the music within. There were three men with guitars, and two women who sang, and they made real melody. There was the minor wail that lies always in the voices of an oppressed or a passing race. They were singing over and over the swinging Puritan march, with a fire inspired of mescal. A tipsy Olympias, crowned, not with the leaves of the ivy of Samothrace, but with a chaplet of dilapidated paper flowers, caught in her dishevelled hair, danced on a table in

the middle of the room, throwing darting black shadows against the stained and broken wall. The men applauded with shouts and yells. The uproar made no difference to Keble. He ran his hands deep into his pockets, crossed his booted legs, and leaned against the front of the house. There was a frown on his forehead as he looked up to the stars, seeing them no more than he saw the woman who came to the threshold and tried to attract his attention. She turned away with a shrug of her shoulders when he did not heed her. "Oye — amigo!"

The music rose to a pitch of ecstasy. It ran as an undercurrent to his thoughts, and did not disturb them. The tune had changed, and he hummed it unconsciously between his set teeth as he put himself to planning his future. It was the first time he had looked ahead with any purpose. Up to then he had stayed around the cabin and the adjacent foot-hills most of the time, being of use to his father and

THERE WAS A FROWN ON HIS FOREHEAD, AS HE LOOKED UP TO THE STARS.

mother, going off in the Spring and Fall, perhaps, to help at round-ups. When he had thought about his career at all, he had supposed that he would eventually — when his brother should grow large enough to take his place at home — be a cow-boy, or, in the intervals of that employment, a prospector. He had not wanted to be a rancher. The life of the tiller of the soil had seemed to him too tame and without events. Just at present he was inclined to consider it in another light. To have a good ranch somewhere down by one of the rare river flats, and live on it with one's wife and family — it would not be so bad as he had once thought.

Money had been a thing for which he had never had much need. He knew of nothing outside the trashy stock of a general merchandise and grocery store that it would buy, save only whiskey and the passing affections of women. And the attraction of either of these last was not apparent to him. Now the

vista of the future was lighted for him by a girl's eyes. Decidedly, if he were going to marry Felicia, he must begin to think of getting her a home in time, of settling down to some one purpose. A woman could not share the life of a prospector or a cow-boy. That ambition, as an ultimate, vanished forever. He might, indeed, have to be a cow-boy or a prospector for a time, but only as a way to the end — which was to earn money. At present he had ten dollars in the world, ten dollars upon which to undertake the providing for two and the entry upon married life. But poverty had no terrors for him — in this part of the country it did not need to have for any man of common intelligence and a strong arm. Had he had less than half the ten dollars, he would still not have hesitated. When he should want work and pay, he would be able to get them.

And having settled that to his satisfaction, he stood up and walked over to the corral where his horse was and where

he had left his saddle and blanket. He found the blanket and started out again.

"Que haces?" demanded the man who was guarding the corral, waking from his doze. "W'at are you doing?"

"Voy acostarme," Keble answered.

"W'ere?" questioned the Mexican; "donde?"

"Eu algun rincon," he called back. And so to bed in a corner he went, even as he had said. Funds were not, after all, so plentiful that he had any to waste on the quite unnecessary and superfluous comforts of a lodging. He wrapped himself in the blanket, and lying down in a corner formed by the corral wall and that of a house, pillowed his head on his arm and went to sleep—not the only one who slept in the streets of the town that night, with the star-flecked sky above, and for lullaby the rustle of the cottonwoods' silvery leaves, and the echoes of song and music that came out from wide open doors. But most of the others slept where they had fallen, and

there were two besides — one by the church, and the other in a narrow way between some houses — who slept a deeper sleep from which they would not awaken. There was blood on the soft dust where they lay, and a knife wound between the shoulders of each — not the greatest harm, perhaps, that mescal and women had led to that night.

It was beginning to be light when Keble moved his head on his arm and, stirring, opened his eyes. He had not been there for quite two hours. The grey sky was yellowing. A woman, huddled in a black shawl, scuffled by, a cock crowed from some yard, and another and many another answered it. His dog, which had slept beside the pony in the stall, came over to him wagging its tail and wriggling. He sat up and shivered a little. He was not cold, but the ground had been hard, and his muscles were cramped. The indistinct outlines of the trees and the low, white houses grew slowly clear. He heard the

water in the acequia rippling, and the leaves swishing and whispering in the dawn breeze. The sun came up, and with it the priest emerged from his house and went to unlock the doors of the church and throw them open. There were not many who came to the early mass, only old men and women and a few small children. The rest of the town was sleeping deeply after its revelry.

Keble, after having folded his blanket and put it back, made his toilet at a water trough, combed his still dripping hair and retied his neckerchief, which was red and bright yellow. After that he made no further immediate attempt to see Felicia than merely standing for a time on a corner and watching the wagons until she came out of hers. It was then nearly eight o'clock. He joined her. They were, she told him, going to the hotel for breakfast — all four of them. The box-office receipts of the night before, and the probable ones of the night to come, justified the

expenditure. That, Dudley knew from past experience, would be decidedly out of all proportion to the merits of the meal. The coffee and the flies were both thick at the hotel, but the town offered nothing a great deal better. He decided to permit himself the extravagance of four bits and to breakfast there also.

They found him already at the long table when they arrived. His coat hung on a peg at the side of the room; but he had on the garment of all needful ceremony — his vest. To have sat down without that, in the presence of women, would never have occurred to him, nor to most of the men present.

After the breakfast he waited for Felicia outside, and they strolled off to the outskirts of the town, past the dump-heaps of bottles and glistening cans, and coming to a fair-sized mesquite bush sat in its patch of shade. He took a bright new ten-cent piece from his pocket, and opening his knife began scraping it in

the centre. It was his intention to make a ring for Felicia out of the corrugated rim, and he told her so. Should she give him a curl of her hair in exchange? she asked, taking one between her thumb and finger, pulling it forward and considering it at an angle of vision.

He looked at it, then shook his head. "I'll take them all, by and by — or none," he announced.

The process of making the ring was a slow one, and it was by no means completed when the sun had got to well past mid-heaven. It was time, then, to go back to the town for dinner. Moreover, there was no shade under the mesquite, and had not been for some time. Keble went back also, but not to dinner. Two meals a day, he had decided, would suffice him just at present. And whereas breakfast and supper cost fifty cents, dinners required an extra quarter.

He found some old friends of his last round-up, and went off with them to

their room at a boarding-house. It was not until late in the afternoon, when it was almost dusk; that he returned to look for Felicia again. She was not with the outfit and not in the streets. He bethought himself of the church and went over there. No one was visible in the deep gloom just at first, but presently a woman came toward him. She had a grey shawl over her head and until she was near, he took her to be Felicia. Then he saw that it was only her aunt. He asked for the girl. Mrs. Denison knew nothing as to her whereabouts. She herself, she explained hastily, had been saying her prayers. He nodded indifferently. The action was doubtless laudable; but devotions were hardly what he would have expected of her. They left the church together and walked down the street; then, as a last resort, he went over to the hotel. It was possible that Felicia had gone into the big darkened parlour to be cool and quiet.

And there he found her, after his eyes had grown accustomed to the little light. She had fallen asleep on a lounge, curled up not very comfortably, her cheek in her hand. There was no one else in the room, and though the windows were open, the green shutters were closed. Outside indolent Mexican feet shuffled by on the gravel, or more determined American ones crunched sharply. The cottonwoods rustled and the acequias rippled. He sat down by the sofa to wait until Felicia should awake.

CHAPTER V

INSIDE the music-hall, on the stage before a breathless audience, the play was reaching its climax. Outside, in the street in front, that which was in serious and dangerous earnest was reaching a climax, too. The golden chain had been missed from the neck of Nuestra Señora del Carmen. The priest had had occasion to go into the church about nine o'clock; he had happened to notice the statue, and had seen that its most valuable ornament had disappeared. Coming forth in dismay and consternation, he had spread the news. Whom did he suspect? had been asked at once. He did not know, he had no idea, — unless it were the niña Americana, the little one

who was here with the strolling actors. She had been a good deal around the church; and, yes, he recalled that he had seen her with her grey shawl over her head coming out from there late in evening, some time after every one else had left. Still, he hastened to add, fearful of doing an injustice, it might not have been she at all. She had seemed very devout. And there were plenty of others who were certainly not above suspicion in Tierra Blanca.

Nevertheless, some one or two reported that it might, the padre said, have been the niña Gringa. Some eight or ten passed it on that the padre had said it was indeed she. The news had spread fast among the people. An act of sacrilege had been committed, the greatest and most valuable treasure of their church had been robbed — and the Gringa girl had done it.

From the music-hall, in the moment of tense interest, there went out no sound to the street. But from the street

there began to come in, low at first, but rising and swelling, a deep and ominous murmur. The actors stopped and waited until they should be able to make themselves heard. The door was tried and rattled. It had been locked from within and did not open. There followed the noise of bodies throwing themselves against it. It shook, strained under a great pressure, gave, and crashed in. A mob of Mexicans crushed and pressed and struggled through, their murmurs rising to a howl. The audience was up on its feet, and the men, both brown and white, had turned and faced them. Six-shooters and knives were already drawn. Keble, from his place just in front of the platform, could see those who were already in hesitate and attempt to fall back; but, pressed from behind, they were forced on. The revolvers were levelled now, and some one called out a demand for an explanation.

"La cadena de oro," was the answer, yelled from a hundred throats at once.

"La niña lo ha robado — the girl has stolen it, has stolen the golden chain."

The brown hands stretched out with one accord all pointing to the stage, to Felicia standing in the light of the lanterns, slight and pale in her long black dress, wide-eyed, frightened, the blotches of rouge vivid and crude against her cheeks. The two men were still with her; but at the first giving of the door her aunt had drawn back to the turkey-red curtains that served for scenery, and had gradually disappeared.

"She had stolen it, la muchacha, la niña, the one in black. She has taken the golden chain from the neck of Nuestra Señora del Carmen. The priest said so, and it is gone."

The little head with its brown curls was thrown back indignantly. "I did not take it," she denied in their own tongue; "I did not know it was gone." Keble heard, but few others did. The howls and roars had begun again, and the Mexicans in the audience were join-

ing in the noise. They outnumbered the white men greatly, and they were surging forward, their women with them. Such of them as were not drunk with mescal and aguardiente were more so, if anything, with fanaticism and that mad rage of crowds which gathers from itself. Whether or no the girl had taken the chain, whether or no the priest had actually accused her of it, they were far past stopping to reason upon. She was a heretic and of a troupe of wandering players — a class always open to suspicion. In their present frenzy these ordinarily mild and sweet-humoured people would need no more evidence upon which to do murder. And Keble, who had known the race from his childhood, knew that.

He went to the foot of the platform. "Put out those lanterns," he commanded. The two men demurred. "Put them out!" he repeated. It was Felicia who obeyed, stooping forward quickly. "Wait for me," he said to her, "go to

the left side window, have it open — and wait for me."

A shot was fired in the back of the room. It was answered by several. There were the yells and shouts and curses of men, the screeches and entreaties of women. Benches and stools and boxes went banging and scraping over. The Mexicans were pressing forward to the shadowy stage. Dudley jumped up on it, grabbing — even as he did so — a six-shooter from some man beside him. He had his own, but he might have need of more than the one, later on. From the platform he faced about, threw out his arm and fired twice. In the cow camps he had won shooting contests more than once. At each of his shots now a bracket lamp went out. The music-hall was in thick darkness, an invisible pit of uproar, of blows and crashes and wails, down there below him. There were one or two more desultory discharges of firearms. And the cries of "la cadena" were

changing to "muera, muera la niña." They *would* kill her, too, if they were to get hold of her now, very probably.

Dudley, on the ground outside, below the window, heard as he reached up his arms. "Quick," he urged, and she was beside him as the first of the mob stumbled and clambered upon the stage. It was lighter outside than it was in the music-hall, and he knew that it would be only a question of a few moments before he and Felicia would be descried. At the front of the building some of the crowd was still pushing to get in. He drew her into the shadow and hurried her around by the back way and off among some of the houses. No one was about, but there were dogs that barked, and that sound would help to trace them.

"I haven't the chain," she whispered piteously. "I haven't — really. I don't know anything about their old cadena."

Of course she did not, he answered absently. He was not thinking so much

of what was behind as of what was ahead. As to where the chain was — he had already drawn conclusions which amounted to a certainty. That, however, could wait until another time. What mattered now was to get Felicia to some place of safety until daylight or the white population should bring the people to reason.

Three ways had already suggested themselves, — to hide, say in some corral or yard or outhouse, was the first. But that they would be tracked and found, betrayed by the yapping of the innumerable curs, was more than a chance. They had come to an opening from which they could see back to the music-hall. From the window by which they themselves had escaped, silhouetted heads and shoulders protruded. The heads and shoulders became whole bodies, dropping from the window to the ground, and starting in different directions in pursuit. Some came directly toward themselves.

The priest — they might go to the priest's house and ask protection. But even on the possibility of the padre being there, asylum might be refused through bigotry or fear. Moreover, he mistrusted priests as, at best, given to subterfuge and double dealing. And had not this one accused Felicia of having stolen?

And last — there was Pepita Arcos, Santa Pepita, whom these Mexicans greatly revered. It was almost a certainty that she would be at home at this hour. He believed that she would help him. It was, perhaps, a bold play, and hazardous, but the chance seemed to him the best. He had been circling all the while in that direction as they had hurried along hugging the shadows. But Pepita's house was still a half a mile away, out beyond one end of the main street. The calls and shouts and barkings behind were coming toward them and nearer.

"Can you run?" he asked quickly;

"for five or ten minutes — for half a mile, to the west end of the town?"

She wasted no words. "Yes," she told him.

He looked down at the long skirt dragging and hindering. She gathered it up, well up, out of the way. He caught one of her hands; it belonged to him now, in any case, he felt, by the promise she had given him late that evening in the big, quiet room of the hotel. "When we begin to run," he warned, "we will be seen. And the dogs will come at us. If we start, we have got to keep on. Can you do it?" She nodded emphatically.

And it was as he had said. The dogs about the houses gave tongue and chase, and presently the two scurrying figures were observed.

"Alli — alli estan," some one in the distance shouted triumphantly, and the pursuit grew hotter. Once a bullet struck the ground in front of Felicia, a little to the right. She did not waver

or hesitate. It flashed across Keble's mind that she ran well, that he was going his fastest, and she was hardly a hindrance. He bent down his head. Could she keep it up? he questioned. Her only reply was to do so, without faltering or slackening the pace. But the crowd, gathering from all directions now, was gaining. The leaders were not two hundred yards behind. The straight, wide street stretched ahead.

They came to the end of it. Beyond was the open country with nothing in sight but the sands and shrubs and cacti, and one very small house, standing alone some distance down the road. There was a light within.

They reached the house and Dudley tried the door. It opened. He pushed Felicia in, followed, shut it, and braced himself against it, shooting a bolt at the same time. A fat Mexican woman, the Señora Arcos, roused from dozing, got up from the dirt floor slowly and laboriously. An inner door opened, and

a girl stood in it, a Mexican also, whose hair, loosed from its braids, fell, blue black about her, over her shoulders well below her knees. It was Josefina. Her whole figure stiffened suddenly and the weighted head went up. She had seen Keble, and had seen, too, the girl beside him, leaning against the wall, shaking with exhaustion and breathlessness.

Dudley caught the instant hardening of the soft, brown eyes. His heart sank. If this desperate chance were to fail, if the saint were to prove a fanatic, the woman jealous and vindictive — then the ten bullets in his two revolvers would be his only hope.

The shouting and barking were close. "Pepita," he said hurriedly, speaking in Spanish, "the chain has been taken from the Virgin's neck — the golden chain. They," he jerked his head over his shoulder toward the town — "they believe that she took it," and he laid his hand on Felicia's shoulder. "But she

did not. I give you my word that she knows nothing of it. Will you tell them so? They will listen to you. If you send them away, they will go. If you don't, they will kill her." He hesitated, then he played his final card. "She is my novia, Pepita. I love her. She is going to marry me. Take care of her for me." And he drew away.

The Mexican looked at the Gringa whose white and frightened face was daubed with red on the cheeks and lips. There was the noise of many feet on the ground outside. But the shouts had stopped. A blow came upon the door. Pepita pointed to the one out of which she herself had just come. "Pase usted," she said. Felicia looked questioningly at Keble. He nodded, "Do all that she tells you to — exactly," he bade her. She obeyed at once, and the Mexican girl shut her into the farther room. Then she put Keble aside.

And she stood forth, black gowned and in the mantle of all her black hair —

Santa Pepita speaking to her own people. The candle shine from the hovel was behind her, outlining her vaguely, making a shimmer about her head. The starlight was on her face. And the men and women fell back from the small cleared space of beaten ground, to the open beyond, among the sparse bushes and the glistening sands.

It was with the speech of authority that she addressed them. They were several hundred, all of them lashed up to the pitch of murder and blood-lust, for the wiping out of sacrilege, many of them wild drunk, most of them armed. The nickel of revolver barrels and the steel of knives glinted.

And the figure in the doorway was only that of a girl whom they had known from the time — not eighteen years before — when she had been born in this same adobe hut. She was defenceless. Almost any woman amongst them could have flung her aside and passed on in. But she was the one who had

laid her hands on sick and crippled folk and — so they believed — caused them to be healed; whose prayers were answered when others prayed in vain; whose supplications to the patron saint had brought rain when the earth had been all white-hot dust and the heavens brass. And when she told them now that they were to go back to the town and to their homes, and to attempt no harm toward the niña Americana, who was innocent and had no knowledge of the chain, they muttered a little, — that the chain was gone, and that the padre himself had accused the Gringa; but they went. They broke away on the outskirts first, and falling and slinking off, finally departed altogether, aimless and balked and ashamed.

The girl turned back into the hut. She was not the Santa Pepita who, standing forth in the starlight, had faced a mob alone, with no weapon save her sanctity and perhaps her soft-eyed gentleness. She was Josefina Arcos, who loved —

not her kind or Heaven — but one man, a blue-eyed, fair-haired young Gringo, the man who tried now to thank her. She was a woman who had seen about to be destroyed the other woman who had won that man's love. She had saved her, and now that the instinct of generosity had had its way, regretted it bitterly, angrily, furiously. She was a little fierce creature who struck down the big hand that was put out to her in gratitude, who ran, with her head back and the magnificence of her black hair flung away from her pitifully drawn and working face, threw open the inner door, snatched at the Gringa's wrist and pulled her forth from the darkness into the candle-light, — pushed her out into the night, faced around on the man, and bade him go to. Then, when she had banged the door behind them both, she ignored the fat old woman who stood staring stupidly, and sank huddling on the ground in a corner, and sobbed and tore the black hair and the palms of her hands, and

even the hard mud floor, moaning regrets for the thing she had done, rising to a sitting posture now and then and cursing the white girl in the two languages whose oaths she had learned in her time, and wailing defiantly that that girl should yet be killed, shot, stabbed, pulled to pieces — should *die*.

And the mother, who would have found a daughter in a dance-hall more profitable than a saint in the favour of the church, who had seen the saint in human moments before this, and was sceptical of canonisation, sat down in a grunting heap amid her litter of cigarette ends, rolled with much deftness some straw paper and tobacco, lit it and smoked it, and another, and yet another, until she nodded and fell asleep, and snored.

CHAPTER VI

ND if there was wailing in the adobe of the saint, there was gnashing of teeth in the wagon of the sinner.

Mrs. Denison had seen herself forced by a mere boy and a fat and untidy Mexican priest, by Lewis, and by the husband whom she held in unmixed contempt, to produce from its hiding-place the bauble which, in her opinion, had hung quite long enough around the neck of a wooden figure, and would, at some future time, in some sufficiently distant place, show to much greater advantage upon her own — the golden chain.

The priest, having been all thankfulness for the recovery of the church's

one valuable votive offering, and all humility and repentance over the results of his ill-considered suggestion, that the niña Americana who had been so much about the church might have been the thief, had refrained from rebuke or admonition. Her husband had not. She had broken up the performance, had put them all in imminent peril of their lives, and had brought the company into a discredit which might prove far-reaching, as a band of pilfering vagabonds. And he had told her what he thought about it in convincing and forceful terms. Keble, Lewis, and the priest had been witnesses of her sulky humiliation, as she had stood leaning against a wheel, tossing her becurl-papered head with unsuccessful defiance, and sneering unsteadily.

The priest had finally gone back to his house carrying his rescued treasure; but young Keble had remained for some while longer, and had taken the occasion to inform them of his intention to deprive the company of the further services of

its youngest member, who would, he explained, be married to him the next morning and stay behind, for the present, at Tierra Blanca. At the moment, he had said, she was over at the hotel, in care of the highly respectable matron who kept it. And she would remain there for the rest of the night. "You can see her in the morning," he had said. "She'll tell you the same thing then."

He had hooked his thumbs into his cartridge belt, and squaring his wide shoulders, had met, unmoved, first refusal, then invective, then persuasion, and even finally the aunt's own tearful entreaties that her niece be not thus ruthlessly torn from her. He would be breaking them up in business, Denison had argued wrathfully. Keble had thought that improbable. They could, he averred, easily pick up some one old enough to be nurse to Mrs. Denison's Juliet. The next good-sized town would very likely produce her. In any case,

it was not of the business that he was thinking. To threats of the enforcement of a natural guardian's rights he had opposed an equally unconcerned front. Whether or not Felicia, by the law of the place, was old enough to be her own mistress he did not know. But the priest, he reminded them, was witness as to who had stolen the Virgin's chain — had been brought along, indeed, precisely to that end. And a word from him would make not only Tierra Blanca, but most parts of the country where devout and pious Mexicans were to be found, uncomfortable and unprofitable for the troupe for some years to come. "He won't talk now," Keble had told them, "at least, he has said he won't. If I give him the word, though, he will — in a hurry."

In the end he had taken his departure still unaffected in his determination. And long after Lewis and Denison had exhausted their well-stocked vocabulary of abuse, in making apparent to the

woman the most salient points of beauty of the situation, and the full extent and purport of the results of her action; long after they were sleeping the sleep of those who have done their utmost and have nothing upon that score to reproach themselves with; long after the little town had become quiet save for occasional sounds from some saloon, and the barking of dogs answering to each other, or to coyotes off on the dim flat, Mrs. Denison came out again from the wagon in which she had been thrashing from side to side. She made her way to the hotel, with the intention of seeing her niece and trying to induce her to leave Tierra Blanca before daylight — as they themselves intended to do in order to avoid possible further trouble with the natives. But some one was walking back and forth on the strip of hard soil between the row of cottonwoods and the hotel door. She crept nearer, from trunk to trunk. It was Keble, his thumbs still hooked in his cartridge

belt, his shoulders still squared, pacing up and down, mounting guard, full of his new responsibility, and waiting for the daylight.

When that came, the deep blue growing whiter on the sky line to the east, then flushing, then spreading quickly over all the zenith in vivid yellow that foretold the fiery heat to follow; when the morning was just beginning, he stood, with Felicia beside him, looking blankly at the place where the two wagons and the hobbled horses had been. There were now only the tracks and débris, the scattered hay and grain of what had been a camping spot. The teams had already pulled out. They walked together down the street, past the church, between the low, white houses in which no one seemed to be stirring yet. And coming out into the open, they saw far down the streak of road which stretched away and away across the face of the sun-gilded waste the white canvas tops of two wagons, which

crawled along toward the faint blue range of mountains with its one snow peak.

They were side by side and hand in hand. He bent his head and looked down into the face that was hardly on a level with his shoulders, a pale and wistful face, with lips which were quivering now. She raised her eyes. And they were full of tears. Two big tears were on her cheeks.

No one was in the desert that reached away in front of them, no one was out in the street behind. And they neither of them thought of a little Mexican girl who was standing in the doorway of the adobe hut, not a stone's throw in the rear, standing in the same doorway from which she had held back the mob of her fanatic and vengeful people not many hours before.

For Keble there was, just then, no woman in all the fresh, new world save only the one whom he took into his arms, and held and kissed; while a

linnet on a sahuaro trilled its song to the daybreak, and was answered by the caged and lonely mocking-bird on the wall above Santa Pepita's down-bowed head.

MISS GWENDOLEN OVERTON, whose powerful story, "Anne Carmel," is one of the strongest and finest novels of the year, has come upon very unusual experiences during more than half of her twenty-nine years. The daughter of Captain Gilbert Overton was born in what on the frontier passes for a fort, — an army post in the far West named Fort Hayes; and she began her career of continuous travelling when she was a month or two old. At that time she was taken with the troops, in an ambulance, the long march from Kansas to Arizona. She has lived in nearly all the army posts of Arizona and New Mexico. She took to burro-back in her tenderest years. Soon she was promoted to a mule, and by and by she became a finished and noted horsewoman. She was on the frontier most of the time, and in the East part of the time, until she was fourteen.

Thereafter she and her people lived for a few years in France, where the author of "Anne Carmel" received much of that part of her education which has come from books. To her education in France is doubtless due much of her comparative

horizon; but the larger preparation for writing her first novel was acquired in the Southwest, that "lonely but masterful land." Later the Overtons spent a couple of years in Washington; and when Miss Overton was about twenty-one or twenty-two the family came to live in Los Angeles, California. Here Miss Overton lives when she is not on one of her long periodical trips to the East, to Mexico, to Canada, or elsewhere. She has picked up a good deal of Spanish, as well as an exceptionally fine and accurate knowledge of the French language, of French life, and of the best French literature. For the most part she is now a quiet dweller in Los Angeles, of no apparent fondness for the white light that beats upon a reception of writerlings.

The real West, of plains and mountains, rather than modern California, has made Miss Overton what she is. She is often spoken of as a California writer; but as a matter of fact, her genius and her outlook upon life, and to a large extent also her character, both as a woman and as a writer, have been formed by the West of the plains and the mountains, where there

are no health resorts. The portions of Arizona and New Mexico in which army posts were situated a score of years ago, were calculated to leave a deep impression on any one who grew up amid them. For this reason the distinction of Miss Overton as a California writer is inexact; besides, Miss Overton does not, as it happens, write about California. The region that has made her is that described in her first novel, "The Heritage of Unrest." She has lived in so many different places that she is properly spoken of as being of or from that place which has formed her genius,—the part of the West that either breeds self-reliance or kills.

"If I can claim to be from or of any one place, I suppose I should say it was of the part of the country I wrote about in my first book. That life influenced me very greatly; and I dare say that no one who does not know it can understand the hold it takes on the affection and imagination of one who was brought up to it. A reporter asked me a while ago what I read in particular; but as my tastes weren't what seemed to be expected, he

lost interest in the theme. An author should, I gathered, pore over the lives of other authors, — poets and the like; and unfortunately people of action are more to my fancy when it comes to biography." Miss Overton reads few modern novels. Probably any one who has been brought up and trained on the better French novelists and the French critics becomes hypercritical. "Personally I know I have a standard so severe as a consequence of Sainte-Beuve and Brunetière that I am foredoomed to dissatisfaction with anything I may do."

Miss Overton is at her desk by 8.30 every morning, and works until luncheon. She spends her afternoons in recreation. In particular she likes sailing, and much of her playtime is spent on the water in company with her younger brother.